

NEWS RELEASE

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U.S. Department of Energy

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SECRETARY O'LEARY ANNOUNCES PREPARATION
OF ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AT ROCKY FLATS PLANT

GOLDEN, Colo., June 17, 1993 -- Energy Secretary Hazel R. O'Leary announced today that an environmental assessment will be prepared on the proposed resumption of plutonium thermal stabilization operations in Building 707 at the Rocky Flats Plant near Golden, Colo.

The assessment will evaluate the potential environmental impact of the proposal and is being prepared to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act. In view of potential safety risks associated with the extended storage of plutonium that has not undergone the thermal stabilization process, Department officials will proceed with the assessment as a high-priority fast-track effort.

A public meeting to discuss the scope of the environmental assessment will be held at the Ramada Hotel, Westminster, Colo., from 7 to 9 p.m. on July 7, 1993. A draft assessment will be provided to Colorado state officials and requesting private organizations and individuals for a 30-day comment period. The Department will consider comments before deciding whether to finalize the assessment and begin thermal stabilization or further evaluate the environmental impact by preparing an Environmental Impact Statement.

Thermal stabilization involves the conversion of partially oxidized plutonium, which generates heat and can spontaneously combust, into a form which is more suitable for safe storage and transportation. The buildings where plutonium is stored are equipped with safety systems designed to protect the workers and the public and neighboring communities.

Extensive safety reviews of the proposed operation have been conducted by the Department of Energy as part of its Operational Readiness Review, as well as by the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board.

Plutonium operations in Building 707 were suspended in 1989. Since then, many improvements have been made which enhance the safety associated with thermal stabilization. The improvements include the development of new procedures, training and qualification of personnel, and the testing, repair, and upgrading of safety systems.

There are no plans to resume manufacturing of plutonium weapon components at the Rocky Flats Plant.

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